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# Judges' Perceptions of the Nebraska CASA Program

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## Abstract

This article discusses judges' perceptions of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) programs in the rural state of Nebraska, as reported in two online surveys. The goal of CASA is "to train and support volunteers in advocating for safe and permanent homes for abused and neglected children" (CASA for Children, 2013). One survey investigated the opinions of judges presiding in Nebraska counties that did not yet have a local CASA program; another was administered to judges in counties that did have a CASA program. Data from both surveys were analyzed separately and then compared to provide information regarding judges' satisfaction with local programs and general perceptions of Nebraska CASA programs. Results contain a hopeful tone for the Nebraska CASA Association and their goal of providing every child a voice by 2020 and provide vital information for program growth. This study could inform other states' CASA programs seeking similar information to guide program growth.

### Key words:

Judges

Advocacy

Volunteers

Child welfare

Foster children

Rural

## Judges' Perceptions of the Nebraska CASA Program

Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, particularly children who have been removed from their primary caregivers as a result of abuse and/or neglect. According to the report of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System for federal fiscal year 2012, 678,810 children were reported to be victims of child abuse and neglect and an estimated 1,593 children died from abuse and neglect (Child Maltreatment 2012, 2013). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System report for fiscal year 2012 revealed that 397,122 children were in foster care on September 30, 2012, and 101,666 children were awaiting adoption (The AFCARS Report, 2013). The substantial number of children in the United States lacking safe and permanent homes has been of concern to child welfare advocates for decades, consequently leading to the realization that abused and neglected children were in need of an entity solely dedicated to advocating for their well-being, especially for those children in out-of-home care.

In 1974, the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) responded to the need for child advocates by requiring that an attorney be appointed as guardian ad litem (GAL) on behalf of each abused and neglected child involved with the court system. Three years later, a juvenile court judge dissatisfied with the GALs in King County, Washington, appointed a community volunteer to assume the role of GAL, thus establishing the first Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer (Litzelfelner, 2008). CAPTA was amended to allow CASA volunteers to meet the federal GAL requirement in 1996, and CASA programs have been expanding across the United States ever since. A total of 933 CASA programs with approximately 77,000 volunteers represented 234,000 abused and neglected children in 2012 (CASA for Children, 2013).

The goal of CASA is found in their mission: “to train and support volunteers in advocating for safe and permanent homes for abused and neglected children” (CASA for Children, 2013). CASA programs provide their unpaid volunteers with extensive training on the dynamics of child abuse and neglect, the court system, and advocacy. While GALs and caseworkers often carry heavy caseloads and experience high turnover, CASA volunteers are assigned to one or two cases and are expected to remain involved for the duration of the case. CASA volunteers are often the only stable factor in the child’s life during his or her time in the foster care system (Litzelfelner, 2008; Weisz & Thai, 2003). Abramson (1991) found that when volunteers were sufficiently trained and supervised, CASA volunteers’ quality of services equated service provision of other paid professional advocates at a significantly reduced cost, making the CASA program not only effective, but also efficient.

The service provision role of a CASA volunteer is multidimensional. Expectations of volunteers include the ability to facilitate compromises between all involved parties, develop a clear understanding of the needs and interests of the child, provide court reports containing recommendations representing the child’s best interests, and monitor court orders to ensure all parties are in compliance (CASA for Children, 2013; Caulkins & Millar, 1999; Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009; Litzelfelner, 2008; Weisz & Thai, 2003). In many states, CASA volunteers and GALs work together in advocating for children; however, in some states CASA volunteers are responsible for providing legal representation by assuming the role of GAL (Caulkins & Millar, 1999; Kaplan et al., 2009; Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 2000).

Although literature on the benefits of CASA programs diverge and at times lack statistical significance, the research predominately determined that CASA volunteers were at least as, if not more, effective as other child representatives (Caulkins & Millar, 1999; Leung,

1996; Litzelfelner, 2000; Poertner & Press, 1990). In several studies, CASA program involvement was found to increase the number of services provided to and contacts made with children in foster care (Caulkins & Millar, 1999; Litzelfelner, 2000; Poertner & Press, 1990). Judges were found to be more likely to receive a court report prior to hearings (Weisz & Thai, 2003), and positive changes during the court process were also attributed to the work of CASA volunteers (Leung, 1996; Outley, 2006). Additionally, the literature supported the idea that CASA program participation reduced the number of placements (Caulkins & Millar, 1999) and increased the likelihood that children would achieve expedited permanency (Abramson, 1991; Caulkins & Millar, 1999; Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 2000; Poertner & Press, 1990). Although CASA program outcome-related studies trend toward deeming CASA an effective program, some studies show that this is not entirely the case. For example, Litzelfelner (2000) found that CASA programs had some influence on process variables that were believed to have an impact on permanency outcomes, such as fewer placements and fewer court continuances; however, both Litzelfelner (2000) and Weisz and Thai (2003) found the presence of CASA volunteers did not directly influence permanency outcomes for children.

### **Juvenile Judges and CASA**

Research studies of particular interest to the current study are those related to judges' opinions of the CASA program. Often, the judge is the single court authority who possesses the power to allow a CASA program into his or her court system. Current literature on judges' opinions, while limited, contains insight into perceived CASA volunteer roles, the impact of their roles on the court, and overall satisfaction with their services.

In 2005, the National CASA Association conducted a national judge survey gathering information on demographic factors of responding judges and the jurisdictions they served, how

judges assigned CASA volunteers to cases, the roles that volunteers played in court processes and decision making, and judges' satisfaction with services (Organizational Research Services, 2005). Participating judges' responses were resoundingly positive regarding the value and effectiveness of CASA volunteers' work.

In another study, Weisz and Thai (2003) surveyed CASA volunteers, GALs, and judges in an effort to examine three objectives: (a) whether CASA volunteers provided more relevant information to the courts than other involved professionals, (b) the impact CASA volunteers had on the legal representation of children, and (c) whether CASA volunteers were more active than GALs in obtaining information from several sources. While this study was not a satisfaction survey per se, results indicated that judges were more satisfied with court reports obtained from CASA volunteers than from caseworkers or GALs and that CASA volunteers were beneficial in providing support for the children they served (Weisz & Thai, 2003).

Finally, a study by Litzelfelner (2008) designed specifically to assess program satisfaction surveyed judges, attorneys, parents, and caseworkers on their opinions of the advocates' roles, levels of professionalism, influences, usefulness, reputations, and relationships with involved parties. Overall, responses from judges and attorneys were more positive than those from parents and caseworkers (Litzelfelner, 2008).

## **Methodology**

### **Context**

Several factors are important for understanding the current status of Nebraska's foster care system and, thus, the environment within which Nebraska's CASA programs operate. First, general information about Nebraska's geographical landscape and demographics will be provided, along with a brief background of the creation of the CASA program in Nebraska.

Next, contextual factors impacting Nebraska's foster care system will be discussed, including results from a 2009 report evaluating the state's GAL system and a synopsis of Nebraska's recent failed effort at privatization.

Nebraska is a rural state with a 2012 population of 1,855,525, of which 25% were under age 18. Although much racial diversity is present in its two largest cities, 90% of people residing in Nebraska reported as being White alone in 2012 (U.S. Census, 2013). The state has 93 counties and covers 76,824 square miles, 93% of which is farm and ranch land (Nebraska Agriculture, 2013). Counties found along Interstate 80 (I-80), which runs across Nebraska, have the highest population densities in the state. The two largest cities can be found just off of I-80: Omaha (population: 421,570) and Lincoln (population: 265,404).

Particularly in the more rural areas of Nebraska, foster homes can be in short supply. Many children are placed in different communities and even different counties than their homes or court jurisdictions. Professionals and volunteers must often travel long distances to meet with children. Needed services are not often available—or in existence—and programs can face resistance from small, rural communities due to fear and distrust. Additionally, professionals and volunteers must frequently play multiple roles to meet the needs of children and families, with judges often presiding over multiple counties. All of these factors influence the state's ability to provide for the needs of children and families (C. Kielty, personal communication, February 26, 2014).

In an effort to improve the way these needs are met, the Nebraska CASA Association was established in 1977. It provides guidance and support to 22 local CASA programs serving 36 counties across the state. In 2012, the Nebraska CASA Association Board of Directors set a



vision of providing every abused and neglected child in Nebraska with a voice in court by the year 2020.

In Nebraska, GALs are licensed attorneys who are statutorily obligated to represent children's best interests in court, while also defending children's legal and social interests and acting as their counsel. A GAL is assigned to every child in foster care. In an effort to identify areas of strength and weakness, the Nebraska Legislature called for an evaluation of the GAL system in Nebraska in 2008, leading to a 2009 report conducted by the National Association of Counsel for Children. This report revealed several negative judicial opinions of the attorney GAL system in Nebraska, including perceptions of GALs as having poor or nonexistent relationships with their clients, poor quality court reports, and inadequate training in dealing with the client population. There was also confusion regarding GALs' dual roles as advocates for children's best interests and as their legal attorneys, with some judges indicating that GALs were to solely represent children's best interests and not to act as legal counsel. Findings of the report pointed to the need for reform of the GAL system on both short- and long-term levels (Pitchal, Freundlich, & Kendrik, 2009).

It is important to acknowledge that this study was not peer-reviewed, but rather a response to a request from the Nebraska Legislature. Additionally, data for this report were gathered during a stressful and tumultuous time period for Nebraska's child welfare system—in early 2009, just on the cusp of a privatization effort—and there have not been any consequent studies to determine whether or how the GAL system has changed since.

Several significant events occurred in the years and months leading up to Nebraska's failed experiment with privatization, including the restructuring of the state's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in 2006, the passage of Nebraska's "safe haven" bill in

2008 (which did not specify an age limit for which a child could be left at a hospital or other site, resulting in a wave of children and teenagers [some from other states] being dropped off at designated safe haven sites in Nebraska), the passage of another safe haven bill four months later limiting the age to infants under 30 days, and turnover in both the Division of Children and Family Services (CFS) director and DHHS chief executive officer positions in April and June 2009. These stressors, along with years of ranking among the top states in removal rates of children while receiving below average performance reviews in the federal Child and Family Services Review, set the stage for DHHS's effort in 2009 to reform Nebraska's child welfare system (Nebraska Appleseed, 2012; Performance Audit Committee of the Nebraska Legislature, 2011).

In November 2009, five agencies in Nebraska signed final contracts to be "lead agencies" in providing service coordination for families and children involved in the foster care system. These five lead agencies were to begin full implementation of services by April 2010. That April, however, one agency announced it would withdraw due to inadequate reimbursement and another filed for bankruptcy, resulting in approximately 2,000 children and their families being left without reimbursement, support, or services. In September 2010, another agency terminated its contract. Turnover within the DHHS administration continued in October 2011, when the new CFS director resigned. The next month, one of the two remaining lead agencies wrote to DHHS indicating that unless the agency received more money, they would terminate their contract. That agency's contract was terminated in February 2012, and only eight days were given to transition their cases back to DHHS. Currently, one remaining lead agency continues managing child welfare cases in the Omaha area; the rest of the state is again managed by DHHS (Nebraska Appleseed, 2012; Performance Audit Committee of the Nebraska Legislature, 2011).

Nebraska's privatization effort resulted in a number of negative outcomes, including increased costs for child welfare, mismanagement of tax dollars, loss of many service providers, turmoil for children and families, and expenditure of millions of dollars on administrative costs and oversight, pulling funds away from direct services and other critical programs. All of this has drawn the attention of many national groups and resulted in several pieces of legislation increasing the Nebraska Legislature's oversight of DHHS and the child welfare system (Nebraska Appleseed, 2012).

Each of these contextual factors has a significant impact on the way CASA volunteers in Nebraska work with their families. Some face challenges based on geographical area and a general lack of available services; others face suspicion and mistrust from families and children—and even judges—in the aftermath of the privatization. As judges' opinions heavily dictate whether a CASA program begins or continues operating within a county, and in light of the outcomes of Nebraska's GAL evaluation, the Nebraska CASA Association partnered with these researchers to conduct an exploratory study measuring judicial perceptions of the CASA program and identifying how CASA programs may be able to overcome some of these contextual obstacles.

### **Survey Design**

Two surveys were collaboratively developed between the researchers and the Nebraska CASA Association for this study. One survey investigated the opinions of judges presiding in Nebraska counties that did not yet have a local CASA program; another was administered to judges in counties that did have a CASA program present. Data from both surveys were analyzed separately and then compared to provide information regarding judges' satisfaction of local programs and general perceptions of the Nebraska CASA program.

Researchers worked with the executive director of the Nebraska CASA Association and local CASA program directors to develop the first survey, which focused on measuring judicial perceptions in counties that did not yet have a CASA program. The resulting 21-item survey was prepared with a goal of assessing judges' interest in and readiness for the development of a CASA program in their counties. A nearly identical version of the survey was also distributed to each county attorney in those counties. Survey questions were geared toward assessing general attitude about CASA, gathering information about the community's perception of the need for a CASA program, and determining the county's readiness to take next steps in the formation of a CASA program. The survey included open-ended, Likert-scale, multiple choice, and other close-ended questions.

A survey was also collaboratively developed for judges in counties currently employing CASA programs to assess judges' perceptions of individual programs' strengths and limitations. The 21-item survey focused on judges' opinions of the efficacy of CASA volunteers in areas such as information provided to the court, level of professionalism, and influence on safety and permanency outcomes. Judges' demographic information and general opinions regarding child abuse and neglect were collected as part of the survey. Again, the survey included open-ended, Likert-scale, multiple choice, and close-ended questions.

## **Procedure**

Prior to distributing each survey, approval was obtained from the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Institutional Review Board. Initial contact with judges was then made via the Nebraska Administrative Office of the Courts. An email was sent to the 27 judges and 53 county attorneys in counties not yet served by a CASA program and the 32 juvenile court judges utilizing the CASA program in their courtrooms. Included in emails sent to judges and county

attorneys in counties not yet utilizing the CASA program was a link to the online survey, a consent letter, demographic information about children in foster care in their county, and an information sheet about the CASA program. Judges in counties utilizing the CASA program were sent an email with the survey as an attachment, along with a consent letter and instructions on how to return the survey to the researchers as an email attachment.

Following initial contact, several other methods of survey collection were utilized in an effort to increase the response rate. Follow-up contact included email reminders, individual phone calls, and, for judges already utilizing the CASA program, hand-delivered surveys.

### **Participants**

In sum, 47 surveys were collected, yielding a collective response rate of 42%. A total of 36 judges completed a survey: 18 in counties not yet utilizing the CASA program and 18 in counties currently being served by a CASA program. Two judges sent in duplicated responses for their county. Only 11 county attorneys returned surveys. For the purposes of this exploratory study, only judges' responses are included.

### **Results**

The term "No CASA" will be used in reference to responses from judges who were not utilizing a CASA program at the time of survey administration, and "CASA" will be used to denote survey results gathered from judges in counties that were being served by a CASA program.

#### **Judges' Responses in the "No CASA" Group**

The first stage of this exploratory study was intended to evaluate perceptions and attitudes toward the CASA program in Nebraska counties not yet served by a local program. "No CASA" judges reported their general impressions of the CASA program as "very positive"

(22%), “somewhat positive” (44%), or “neither positive nor negative” (33%). When asked to identify barriers preventing them from supporting the implementation of a CASA program in their county, common barriers included lack of funding (50%), uncertainty about community support (42%), and other barriers (42%). Over half of judges thought the best way to generate support and awareness for CASA in their county was through face-to-face meetings with community leaders, community presentations, and public service announcements (PSAs) (53%). Many judges also wanted to receive guidelines for how to bring a CASA program to their county, and, for determining their role in doing so, they wanted information on funding options. Several judges were also willing to publicly support the CASA program and to educate county officials about the program. None of the judges, however, readily indicated willingness to offer direct or in-kind financial support or office space to the program. See Table 3 for more of the “No CASA” judges’ responses.

Although the low response rate prevented the ability to determine statistical significance, several themes emerged from bivariate analysis of “No CASA” survey results. Judges’ self-reported satisfaction with the current system’s ability to handle cases of child abuse and neglect was found to have a positive correlation with length of time in position, the number of Child Protective Services (CPS) reports alleging abuse and/or neglect in the county, and the percentage of child abuse and neglect reports that were substantiated by CPS. In other words, judges who had been in their position longer or who saw more cases of child abuse and neglect in their courtroom reported having more faith in the system. Judges from the western, or more rural, areas of Nebraska also tended to be more satisfied with the current system’s ability to handle cases of child abuse and neglect. Respondents from the most populated counties also reported being more satisfied. This trend was not reflected in the smallest and medium-sized populations,

as smaller counties expressed more satisfaction than medium-sized counties. The same was true when looking at the number of children in foster care. While counties with the highest number of children in foster care expressed the most satisfaction with the current system, counties with very few children in care reported being more satisfied than counties with slightly more children in care.

A negative correlation was noted between “No CASA” judges’ perceptions of their county’s view of the CASA program and the length of time they had been in their position. In other words, as the length of time in their position increased, their community’s view of the CASA program was reported as being less favorable and more in-between. Respondents from western and northern areas of the state were more likely to report that their community had a favorable view of the CASA program than those from the southeastern areas.

### **Judges’ Responses in the “CASA” Group**

The intention of the second survey was to inform the Nebraska CASA Association of the strengths and weaknesses of local programs as seen by judges, who have the executive power to decide whether to utilize CASA volunteers in their court system. Judges in the “CASA” group largely reported being “very supportive” of the program (94%), with only one judge reporting being “somewhat supportive” (6%). When asked about safety and timeliness to permanency, the majority reported that children assigned a CASA volunteer were “significantly safer” (19%) or “somewhat safer” (75%) than children not assigned a volunteer. Over half of “CASA” judges reported that timeliness to permanency for children involved in the CASA program was about the same as cases without CASA volunteers (59%), and over three-quarters reported that children with a CASA volunteer received needed services at about the same rate as children without a volunteer (77%).

Judges identified several helpful roles of CASA volunteers, including ongoing relationships with children (100%), providing children a voice in court (94%), providing details of children's lives via reports (89%), communicating with GALs and caseworkers (78%), and providing court reports (72%). The majority of "CASA" judges reported always receiving court reports from CASA volunteers (72%), and most were "very satisfied" with these reports (83%). Judges reported the CASA program as being either very (77%) or somewhat (24%) helpful in assisting them to make decisions about children. Judges also identified the program as "very cost effective" (82%) or "somewhat cost effective" (12%), with one judge responding neutrality (6%). Most judges identified the CASA program as being either very (41%) or somewhat (53%) influential in assuring positive outcomes for children. When asked about CASA volunteers' conduct, the majority of these judges reported them as being "very professional" (94%). One judge reported CASA volunteers' conduct as being "very unprofessional," but researchers suspected this may have been accidental, as all other answers from that particular judge were positive toward the CASA program. See Table 4 for additional responses from "CASA" judges. Bivariate analyses were not conducted using "CASA" judges' responses due to the small sample size and the nature of the survey items.

### **Comparisons Between "No CASA" and "CASA" Groups**

Although the low response rate diminishes the validity of these findings, several comparisons of interest were identified. An overall finding in Table 1 shows judges in the "CASA" group expressed statistically significantly more support for the CASA program (mean = 4.94, SD = .236) than judges in the "No CASA" group (mean = 4.28, SD = .752) ( $t = -3.598$ ,  $p \leq .000$ ,  $N = 36$ ).



Independent samples t-tests were run to compare support level with three independent variables, including county population and the number of children in foster care in the county. The third independent variable requires some understanding of Nebraska's geographical layout. Because the two largest cities in Nebraska are located within 60 miles of each other in the far eastern region of the state, there is a distinct difference between the primarily rural western area of the state and the primarily urban eastern area. Thus, the locations of judges' judicial districts were used as a third independent variable to determine whether geographical location had an impact on reported satisfaction with the CASA program. Table 1 shares the results of this analysis.

A trend in the results related to states' population density emerged from the findings, suggesting that judges presiding in counties with lower county populations and lower numbers of children in foster care tended to be more supportive of the CASA program in both the "No CASA" and "CASA" groups. Interestingly, however, judges presiding in eastern districts reported slightly more support than those in western counties. These two findings appear somewhat inconsistent, as eastern Nebraska counties are more densely populated than western counties.

In each of the three categories in Table 1, judges in the "CASA" group expressed higher levels of support for the program than judges in the "No CASA" group; however, these differences were not statistically significant. Regardless of category or presence of a CASA program in their county, results indicated judges' levels of support being higher than 4.00 (out of a possible 5.00), with higher support in parts of the state that had lower population and fewer children in care. See Table 1 for further details on these findings.

Table 2 shows responses to additional questions asked of both groups of judges. Again, “CASA” judges more often reported being “very supportive” of the CASA program (94%) than “No CASA” judges (44%). No judge reported being unsupportive of the CASA program. When asked to what extent foster children in their counties had the opportunity for thorough reviews of their cases as compared to other counties, “CASA” judges again responded more favorably, with three-quarters answering “very frequently” (25%) or “frequently” (56%). The majority of “No CASA” judges reported this opportunity for children in their counties as being “about average” (56%) or “frequently” (39%).

### **Discussion**

With thousands of children entering Nebraska’s foster care system each year, it is imperative that professionals, advocates, and stakeholders collaborate to minimize the trauma of children victimized by abuse and neglect. CASA programs strive to meet this objective by empowering community volunteers to provide children with a voice in court. This exploratory study was designed to solicit opinions from two distinct perspectives: judges utilizing local CASA programs in their court systems (the “CASA” group) and judges not yet utilizing CASA programs (the “No CASA” group). This study is the first conducted in Nebraska documenting a statewide initiative geared toward the expansion and enhancement of the CASA program.

Results contain a hopeful tone for the Nebraska CASA Association and their goal of providing every child a voice by 2020, given that judges from both the “No CASA” and “CASA” groups supported CASA programs overall. The statistically significant finding that “CASA” judges possessed a higher level of support than “No CASA” judges is likely due to “CASA” judges’ inherent support for the program, evidenced by their decisions to allow the

presence of CASA in their court systems. Analogous to Litzelfelner's (2008) findings, judges in the present study reported overall positive opinions of CASA programs.

The Nebraska CASA Association partnered with these researchers in part because of the permeating concern about whether the GAL system adequately represents and advocates for children in foster care (Pitchal et al., 2009). CASA volunteers are expected to have an ongoing relationship with children and youth served, provide informative court reports, be extensively trained, and, above all else, act as advocates. Results of the present study indicate that Nebraska CASA volunteers are perceived to be upholding such expectations and may be helpful in addressing some of the shortcomings of the GAL system identified by Pitchal et al. (2009).

Program enhancement information was primarily derived from the "CASA" survey. One edifying survey item asked judges to choose CASA services they found to be most helpful. All 18 respondents reported that the volunteer having an ongoing relationship with the child was helpful. A high frequency of answers demonstrated that providing a child a voice in court, providing details of the child's life, and communication with the GAL and DHHS was also helpful, suggesting that Nebraska CASA programs should continue to provide these services.

Resoundingly high satisfaction ratings given by judges in the "CASA" group suggest that CASA programs will continue to be utilized in those counties. However, the Nebraska CASA Association, congruent with the National CASA Association, strives to serve every child; this requires not only program enhancement, but statewide program expansion. Despite their general support of the program, "No CASA" judges identified several specific barriers and concerns regarding local program implementation that the Nebraska CASA Association should heed in their attempt to reach their expansion goals. Primary barriers as identified by judges were funding and the uncertainty of community support. "No CASA" judges who had been in their

positions longer tended to be more satisfied with the current system's way of handling child abuse and neglect cases. Thus, these judges may have believed the implementation of an additional advocacy program was unnecessary.

Geographic trends in the "No CASA" group showed that judges in the northern and western areas of the state expressed higher levels of perceived community support for the CASA program than their southern and eastern counterparts. As Landsman (2002) and Belanger and Stone (2008) discovered, a lack of adequate child welfare services tends to exist in rural counties, and rural Nebraska is no exception. The majority of Nebraska's child welfare funds and executive power lie in the far eastern region of the state, allocating the highest populated areas most of the resources and services. Judges presiding in smaller communities in the western areas of Nebraska likely reported increased levels of perceived community support for CASA programs because the need for services is high, yet sparse. Thus, it is probable that Nebraska's rural communities would benefit from the extra resources and services that CASA programs are able to provide. Conversely, the eastern and more populated areas of Nebraska generally possess more funding and a wider array of resources, which may lessen the perceived value of the CASA program.

The Nebraska CASA Associations' Board of Directors used survey results from this study in combination with child welfare and population data to guide a plan for program growth. Maps were prepared showing county-specific total population and child population sizes, the number of reports alleging abuse and neglect, the number of children in foster care, and/or the judge's perception of the CASA program. One example of such a map is shown in Figure 1. This map shows that there are already CASA programs in all but one of the counties with the most children in out-of-home care; incidentally, most of these counties fall along the I-80

corridor and also have the highest population densities. In addition to showing program need and judges' perceptions, the maps also help to show where CASA programs could consider expanding to contiguous counties, especially where a judge is serving more than one county. Other counties whose judges had positive perceptions but where there are no CASA programs within 50 miles would require more intentional outreach plans.

The Nebraska CASA Association was particularly interested in judges' perceptions of the program's influence on safety and permanency outcomes, and specific questions were included in the "CASA" group survey to collect this data. Conflicting information regarding CASA programs' influence on improved safety and permanency outcomes exists in the literature (Litzelfelner, 2008; Weis & Thai, 2003), and judges' responses in this study reflected this conflict. Although well over half of responding "CASA" group judges in this study did not perceive CASA programs as being influential in assisting youth in reaching permanency or increasing access to needed services, the majority did indicate that children with CASA volunteers were at least somewhat safer than children without.

## **Implications**

This study is unique in that it explored judges' perceptions of the CASA program in counties with and without local programs. Both surveys were designed to provide information that would facilitate program enhancement and expansion. The predominately positive "CASA" group survey results suggest that judges are generally satisfied with current volunteers' service provision.

It will be important for the Nebraska CASA Association to first address the two most commonly cited barriers by the "No CASA" judges as they continue striving toward expansion: uncertainty of community support and lack of funding. These concerns may be addressed by

highlighting current issues facing children in foster care and by utilizing judges' willingness to publicly support CASA programs and provide education to community leaders by demonstrating the utility and cost effective nature of the programs.

Judges may be assisted in securing community buy-in through outcome studies of the Nebraska CASA program that clearly demonstrate the benefits of CASA volunteers. Showing cost effectiveness will likely be particularly imperative to addressing the lack of funding concern, as "No CASA" judges raised this as a major barrier yet also reported being unwilling to allow for CASA programming funding in their budgets. Overcoming this barrier is promising, given that judges currently implementing CASA programs predominantly viewed the program as "very cost effective." Nebraska CASA would benefit from updating and replicating Abramson's (1991) study, which found that CASA programs have cost effective potential. Additional objectives of the Nebraska CASA Association may be to provide explicit guidelines as to how to implement a program, offer a breakdown of judicial responsibilities, and identify CASA program funding sources to ensure that implementation will not infringe on judicial budgets.

Although judges in counties already utilizing CASA programs were mostly satisfied with service provision, they did not perceive CASA volunteers as being significantly influential in reducing timeliness to permanency or securing access to needed services. The Nebraska CASA Association could continue to enhance their services by focusing on these two important outcomes. Additional studies are needed to evaluate CASA programs' specific influence on children's outcomes.

Apart from analyzing results from the two surveys, it is important that the Nebraska CASA Association take into consideration the unique nature of Nebraska as they continue focusing on statewide expansion. The rurality of the state, the negative national attention

Nebraska child welfare has received in the past 5–10 years, and the variance in attitudes toward the implementation of CASA programs all influence the way Nebraska’s child welfare system operates and the way the Nebraska CASA Association is viewed by judges and other child welfare stakeholders. Additional steps to gather county-specific data in the form of surveys and focus groups of biological parents, foster parents, child welfare workers, and youth could provide valuable qualitative data for the expansion of the CASA program. These measures should be designed to elicit attitudes, concerns, and ideas unique to the targeted community and its individual members. Such additional studies would also help to address the community support concern identified by judges in the “No CASA” group, providing information as to how to best serve the rural areas that notoriously go without services due to fiscal and geographical restraints.

### **Implications for CASA Programs in Other States**

This study was conducted using participants solely from the state of Nebraska; however, the methodology and information derived from the results can be used to inform other state CASA programs that are interested in program enhancement and expansion. Predominantly rural states containing one or two major metropolises may receive more edification from the results of this study, compared to states that are geographically dissimilar to Nebraska. Findings demonstrated that variables such as geographical makeup, population, and attitudes associated with child welfare and child advocacy programs have the potential to influence CASA program functionality. These variables vary by location, and local CASA programs with expansion and quality improvement goals need to possess a keen understanding of how they impact service provision in their states. For example, this study assessed the child welfare status in Nebraska in an attempt to gather tacit knowledge for the purpose of interpreting judicial responses as well as

informing expansion efforts, a strategy additional CASA programs would likely find to be beneficial.

Results, although not necessarily generalizable, provide information pertaining to perceived program strengths and weaknesses as well as barriers to implementation. CASA programs can utilize these findings, applying them where applicable while expanding the knowledge base of their own specific programs. Additionally, both the literature and judges' responses in this study demonstrated that outcome studies are needed to address the uncertainty of CASA programs' influence on safety and permanency outcomes.

Despite using multiple methods to increase survey participation, a low response rate ensued. CASA programs looking to gather similar information may benefit from collaboration with anticipated participants prior to implementation in an attempt to improve response rates and identify the best method or methods for gathering data.

### **Limitations**

This study's low response rate limits the ability to use the data confidently in informing growth or improvement of the Nebraska CASA program. Results can, however, be utilized in preparing to reach out to the counties involved in this project and to advise future studies of a similar nature. Additionally, this study was primarily designed around a survey that, at the time of implementation, was neither published nor standardized. While survey items were developed for the sole use of the Nebraska CASA Association, several questions were similar to those found in other studies (Litzelfelner, 2008; Organizational Research Services, 2005). Therefore, the survey tool was not a standardized measure of satisfaction, and results cannot necessarily be generalized to other CASA programs. Responses to the survey are also subject to bias and individual error, since judges responded independently and may have misinterpreted or misread



questions. The survey was conducted at one point in time, in the midst of a stressful time for the state's child welfare system, which likely impacted judges' responses. Nevertheless, feedback from judges is important in making positive changes for the Nebraska CASA Association and for the children and youth of Nebraska.

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**Table 1 Judges' Level of Support for the CASA Program**  
(1 = unsupportive; 5 = very supportive)

|                              | No CASA Program |           |             | CASA Program |          |             |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|----------|-------------|
|                              | <i>N</i>        | <i>t</i>  | Mean (SD)   | <i>N</i>     | <i>t</i> | Mean (SD)   |
| Overall Level of Support     | 18              | -3.589*** | 4.28 (.752) | 18           | --       | 4.94 (.236) |
| County Population            |                 |           |             |              |          |             |
| Low (0–10,435)               | 10              | 1.446     | 4.50 (.707) | 3            | .436     | 5.00 (.000) |
| High (10,436+)               | 8               |           | 4.00 (.756) | 15           |          | 4.93 (.258) |
| # of Children in Foster Care |                 |           |             |              |          |             |
| Low number (0–34)            | 10              | .761      | 4.40 (.699) | 4            | .523     | 5.00 (.000) |
| High number (35+)            | 8               |           | 4.13 (.835) | 14           |          | 4.93 (.267) |
| Judicial District            |                 |           |             |              |          |             |
| Eastern districts (1–7)      | 10              | .136      | 4.30 (.823) | 8            | .889†    | 5.00 (.000) |
| Western districts (8–12)     | 8               |           | 4.25 (.707) | 10           |          | 4.90 (.316) |

\*\*\* $p \leq .000$  † $p \leq .10$

**Table 2 Judges' Perceptions of the Nebraska CASA Program**

| Survey item  | Judges' Perceptions in Counties with no CASA Program |  | Judges' Perceptions in Counties with a CASA Program |   |
|--|--|--|---|---|
|  | <i>N</i>   | %  | <i>N</i>  | %   |
| How supportive are you (would you be of implementation) of the CASA program at this time?  | 18   | 44% ( $n = 8$ ) very supportive<br>39% ( $n = 7$ ) somewhat supportive<br>17% ( $n = 3$ ) neutral<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) somewhat unsupportive<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) unsupportive | 18  | 94% ( $n = 17$ ) very supportive<br>6% ( $n = 1$ ) somewhat supportive<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) neutral<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) somewhat unsupportive<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) unsupportive |
| Compared to other counties, to what extent do foster children in this county(ies) have the opportunity for thorough reviews of their case? | 18   | 6% ( $n = 1$ ) very frequently<br>39% ( $n = 7$ ) frequently<br>56% ( $n = 10$ ) about average<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) infrequently<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) very infrequently        | 16  | 25% ( $n = 4$ ) very frequently<br>56% ( $n = 9$ ) frequently<br>19% ( $n = 3$ ) about average<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) infrequently<br>0% ( $n = 0$ ) very infrequently       |

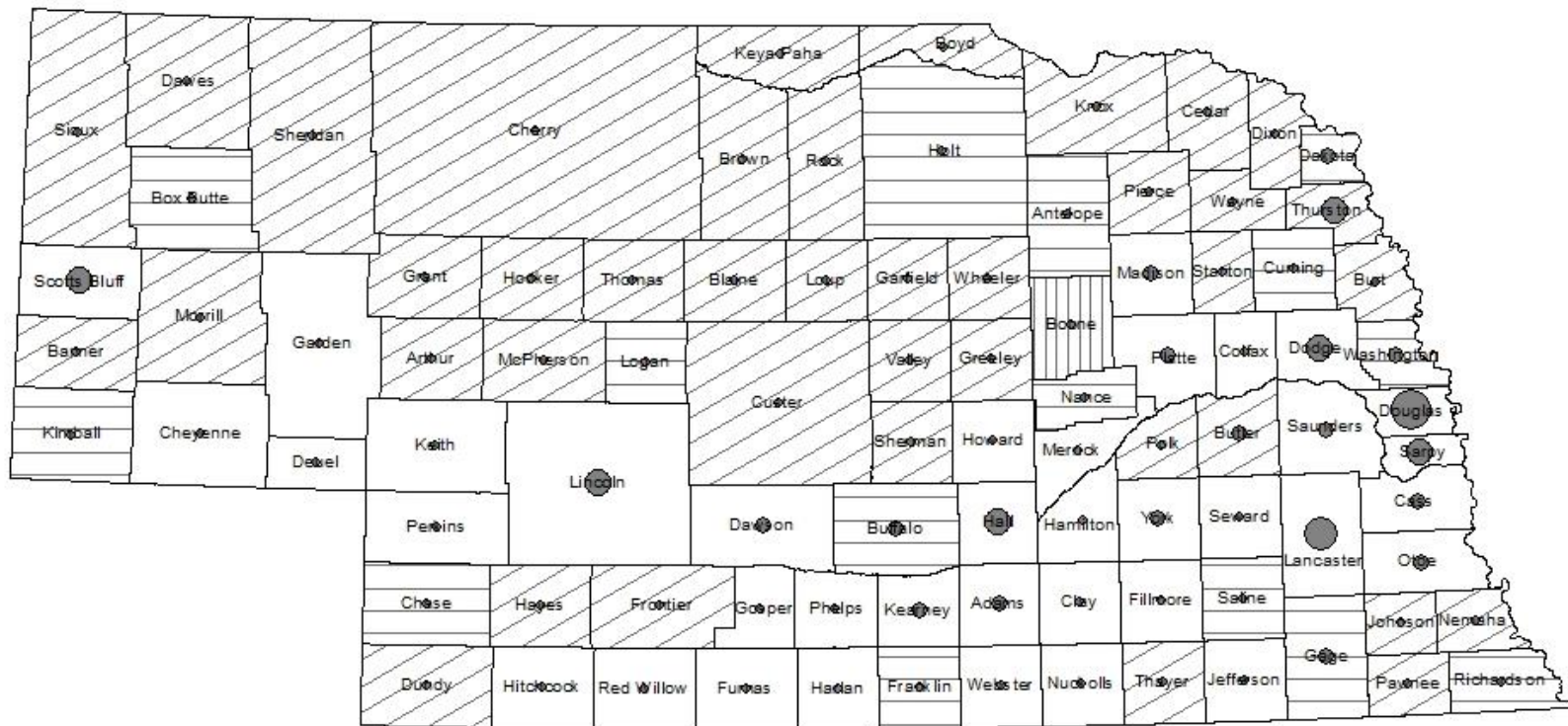
**Table 3 Judges' Responses in Counties Without a CASA Program**

| <b>Survey Questions</b>   | <b>N</b> | <b>Judges' Responses</b>   |
|---|----------|--|
| What, if any, barriers are preventing you from supporting a CASA program at this time? (check all that apply)       | 12       | 50% ( <i>n</i> = 6) lack of funding<br>42% ( <i>n</i> = 5) unsure of community support<br>42% ( <i>n</i> = 5) other<br>25% ( <i>n</i> = 3) lack of knowledge about the benefits of CASA<br>25% ( <i>n</i> = 3) poor past experience with CASA<br>8% ( <i>n</i> = 1) lack of support from the county attorney<br>8% ( <i>n</i> = 1) too much of a time commitment<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) lack of community need  |
| What would be the best way to generate support/awareness about CASA in this county? (check all that apply)          | 15       | 53% ( <i>n</i> = 8) face-to-face meetings with community leaders<br>53% ( <i>n</i> = 8) presentations to community/civic/fraternal groups<br>53% ( <i>n</i> = 8) public service announcements (PSAs)<br>40% ( <i>n</i> = 6) letter to the editor<br>20% ( <i>n</i> = 3) brochures<br>13% ( <i>n</i> = 2) community meeting<br>13% ( <i>n</i> = 2) the media<br>13% ( <i>n</i> = 2) don't know/other  |
| What additional information would you like about implementing a CASA program in this county? (check all that apply) | 11       | 64% ( <i>n</i> = 7) guidelines regarding the judge's role in forming a CASA program<br>55% ( <i>n</i> = 6) funding options<br>45% ( <i>n</i> = 5) guidelines for creating a CASA program<br>36% ( <i>n</i> = 4) specific information about the benefits of CASA<br>36% ( <i>n</i> = 4) recommendations/referrals from other counties or courts<br>27% ( <i>n</i> = 3) statistics regarding foster children in this county<br>18% ( <i>n</i> = 2) other |
| What level of support would you be willing to offer? (check all that apply)   | 14       | 43% ( <i>n</i> = 6) publicly support<br>43% ( <i>n</i> = 6) educate county officials<br>29% ( <i>n</i> = 4) encourage community support<br>21% ( <i>n</i> = 3) educate community leaders<br>14% ( <i>n</i> = 2) whatever I could do<br>14% ( <i>n</i> = 2) other<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) include in your budget<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) provide an office<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) provide in-kind materials  |

**Table 4 Judges' Responses in Counties with a CASA Program**

| <b>Survey Items</b>  | <b>N</b> | <b>Judges' Responses</b>   |
|--|----------|--|
| Safety of children assigned a CASA volunteer compared to children not assigned a CASA volunteer                    | 16       | 19% ( <i>n</i> = 3) significantly safer<br>75% ( <i>n</i> = 12) somewhat safer<br>6% ( <i>n</i> = 1) neutral<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) somewhat less safe<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) significantly less safe  |
| Time to reach permanency for children assigned a CASA volunteer compared to children not assigned a CASA volunteer | 17       | 41% ( <i>n</i> = 7) faster<br>59% ( <i>n</i> = 10) about the same<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) slower   |
| Children assigned a CASA volunteer receive needed services compared to children not assigned a CASA volunteer      | 17       | 24% ( <i>n</i> = 4) more often<br>77% ( <i>n</i> = 13) about the same<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) less often   |
| CASA's role in helping children reach positive outcomes  | 17       | 41% ( <i>n</i> = 7) very influential<br>53% ( <i>n</i> = 9) somewhat influential<br>6% ( <i>n</i> = 1) neutral<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) somewhat unimportant<br>0% ( <i>n</i> = 0) very unimportant   |
| What do you find to be most helpful about the CASA program? (check all that apply)                                 | 18       | 100% ( <i>n</i> = 18) having an ongoing relationship with the child<br>94% ( <i>n</i> = 17) providing children a voice in court<br>89% ( <i>n</i> = 16) providing details of the child's life via reports<br>78% ( <i>n</i> = 14) communicating with GAL and Health and Human Services (HHS)<br>72% ( <i>n</i> = 13) providing court reports<br>67% ( <i>n</i> = 12) attending hearings<br>61% ( <i>n</i> = 11) monitoring the case plan<br>39% ( <i>n</i> = 7) providing resource recommendations<br>22% ( <i>n</i> = 4) providing verbal updates |

Figure 1 Judges' Perceptions of the Nebraska CASA Program and Number of Children in Care



Children in Care, 03/31/11

- ♦ 0 - 20
- 21 - 70

- 71 - 241
- 242 - 789
- 790 - 1635

Judges' Perception of CASA

- has CASA
- ▨ good perception

- ▤ negative/indifferent
- ▦ no survey